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Sandinistas' Rule Is Bolstered By Loyalty of Party and Army

FOREIGN INSIGHT

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Now that the Reagan administration has helped ease out dictators in the Philippines and Haiti, what's to stop it from doing the same in Nicaragua, with a little help from Congress?

The Marcos and Duvalier regimes were three-legged chairs waiting for a push. They had insufficient popular bases, unreliable allies and ultimately disloyal armies. None of these three vital elements is present on the Nicaraguan scene.

The Sandinistas aren't nearly as popular as when they took power in 1979 leading a broad popular front, but they retain a large and tightly disciplined cadre backed by an efficient police apparatus.

Nicaragua's allies, particularly Cuba, will go far to help the regime survive, though stopping short of large-scale involvement of their own military forces. And the Sandinistas don't have to worry about the loyalty of their army; its Leninist structure and ideology make it an equal partner to the Sandinista party.

Land and Christmas Trees

Then there's the Sandinistas' ability to confuse and disarm their civic opposition—which was weak to start with. They called a presidential election in 1984 and split the opposition between those who would participate and those who wouldn't. They organized a "popular" organization for private farmers; those who joined got seeds and were coopted, some of those who didn't faced land confiscation and material shortages. They put Christmas trees in their offices and applauded leftist priests to undercut Catholic opposition to their Marxist views.

Opposition movements in the Philippines and Haiti were totally indigenous and relatively free of foreign influence. Not so the Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua, where political identification with the U.S. is a burden.

The Contras are popularly seen by most Nicaraguans as either elements of the old Somoza National Guard (partly true) or as tools of Washington. Eden Pastora, the famed "Comandante Zero" and most charismatic Contra leader, won't coordinate with the main opposition group because of

its alleged Somoza roots.

It's noteworthy that the Contras' best year militarily by far was 1984, when they were cut off by the U.S. Congress. In that year, they moved more easily out of their Honduran bases and deep into the rugged Nicaraguan mountains. Popular support appeared to be rising. It's possible they would have done even better with U.S. government assistance, but they certainly didn't suffer from a dose of independence.

Counterproductive Aid

When \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid was renewed by Congress last year, much of the private aid the Contras were getting dried up, and the aid they were supposed to receive from Washington became a political hot potato in Honduras. Tegucigalpa demanded more U.S. economic and military aid in exchange for permitting aid to get through to the Contras.

(Honduras continues to block aid from reaching Contra bases through its territory for that reason as well as others. Many top Honduran military leaders believe helping the Contras could lead to conflict with Nicaragua, and they have little confidence the U.S. will back them sufficiently in case of war.)

And, while the Contras run short of boots and uniforms, the Sandinistas fly sophisticated Soviet helicopter gunships and drive heavy tanks. The differential in armed might gives the Sandinistas the appearance of being unstoppable, which has reduced the stream of peasants into Contra ranks.

The army's might is complemented by a smooth and effective Sandinista political machine and police force. In urban centers, barrios are regulated and watched over by Cuban-style block committees. Nicaraguan security forces, which are advised by Cubans, North Koreans and East Germans, have an intelligence network that would have made the old Somoza regime envious.

Despite the constant harassment of the political opposition and the economic collapse the Sandinistas have managed, the revolutionary party retains much popular support, especially among the young. It was only seven years ago that the Sandinistas pulled off a victory over a universally hated dictatorship. And the U.S. effort to punish them gives the Sandinistas an excuse for nearly every failure.